



## A Farmer and his Wife

**Pira Sudham**

Yes, these are our own rice fields. They belonged to my parents and forefathers. Our land is more than three centuries old. I'm the only daughter in our family and it was I who stayed with my parents till they died. My three brothers moved out to their wives' houses when they got married. My husband moved into our house, as is the way with us in Esarn. I was 18 and he was 19 when we wedded. He gave me six

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children. Two died in infancy from sickness. The rest, two boys and two girls, went away as soon as we could afford to buy jeans for them. Our oldest son got a job as a gardener in a rich man's home in Bangkok but later an employment agency sent him to a foreign land to work. My other son also went further afield. Before leaving he came to say farewell to us, telling us that he would go to Germany because a *farang* would take him to live there.

One of our daughters is working in a textile factory in Bangkok, and the other disappeared. Others come home to see us now and then, staying a few days, and then they are off again. Often they send some money and news that they are well. When some people in this village scoff at me, saying that one of my daughters became a prostitute in Pattaya, it's like a knife piercing my heart. It's easier for my husband. He has ears which don't hear, a mouth which doesn't speak, and eyes that don't see. He has always been patient and silent, minding his own life.

All of them remain my children despite their long absence and shortcomings. Maybe it's fate that sent them away from us so that they could have a life of their own. Our piece of land is small, and it has become quite barren, bleeding year after year, and like us getting old and exhausted. Still my husband and I work on our land. For the millionth time, the thumb and fingers of my right hand have dug into the grudging earth, guiding the roots of rice seedlings. For the millionth time I bend over these fields, planting or reaping alongside the silent man. The soil in a bountiful monsoon season is easy to till and the planting is not a heavy task, but in a bad year, it's not only the ploughs that break but the hearts too.

No, we two haven't changed much, but it seems that the village has changed a great deal. In what way? Only ten years ago, you could barter for things, but now it's all cash. Years ago, you could ask your neighbours to help build your house, reap the rice or dig a well. Now, they'll do it if you have money to pay them. Plastic things replace village crafts. Men used to make buckets from weaving fine bamboo pieces and a natural tar from a certain kind of tree. Now plastic bags litter the village. Shops spring up, filled with colourful plastic things and goods which had no use in our village years ago. The young go away to towns and cities, leaving us old people to till the land. They think differently, I know, saying that the old are not up to date with fashion and time. All my life, I haven't had to go to a hairdresser, haven't painted my lips or nails. These gnarled fingers and toes are for working in the mud of my rice fields, not for looking pretty. And they say I am old-fashioned, chewing betel nut and 'plu' leaves smeared with lime. Young girls put on jeans and look like boys, and they think it is fashionable. Why, they are willing to sell a pig or a water buffalo just to be able to afford a pair of jeans so that they'd be in keeping with fashion. In my young days, if I were to put on a pair of trousers like they do now, lightning would strike me, or I would be damned by everyone in this village.

I know. I know, times have changed, but what shouldn't change is *karn tum boon* (merit-making). We should offer food to the monks everyday, go to the temple regularly to pray and to listen to the *Dhamma* and to perform religious deeds and make

donations. Young people tend to leave these to old people now, and that's a shame.

Why, only the other day I heard a young boy shout and scream at his mother. That kind of abuse could not happen in our young days. The whole village would condemn such an ungrateful son, and his father would really give him a good beating. Our lives then seemed to have a kind of code which bound us together and we could go by these codes which parents and grandparents handed down you if you tell the to behave according to us. These days, young people will only laugh at you if you tell them to behave according to code of conduct we knew. We go separate ways, and young people don't stay around.

As for me, I wouldn't change, couldn't change even if I wanted to. I'm neither happy nor unhappy. Life goes on as it has for years. I work alongside my husband like a buffalo. Yes, this bag of bones dressed in rags can still plant and reap rice from morning till dusk. Disease, wounds, hardship and scarcity have been part of my life. Wounds are not treated but left for time to heal. Witch doctors come and try to cure illness, chanting and making magic. All these years death strikes all around me, and still I survive, getting through fever and pain.

If I regret anything at all, it's not having some grandchildren around me.

The farmer: Yes, I have eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear and a mouth that does not speak. I see more than I should, I hear more than is good for one, but then I don't talk of what I know. I know too much already.

When I was about 10 years of age, the abbot of our village temple set up a class in the temple sala to teach young people to read and write. When I heard this news from other youths who were walking by on their way to the class while I was ploughing our fields, I dropped the plough and followed them. It was my father who came to the school a few hours later, taking me back to the fields. At the time, I felt vaguely a sense of loss, but I went back to the buffaloes and the paddies without a word of protest.

It was when I became a monk in our village temple that I had a chance to learn how to read and write. I told the old abbot of the story, and he remembered that my father took me away from the class. So he patiently taught me and other monks who wanted to be literate. Intentionally I stayed in the monkhood more than the normal period of three months of retreat during the rainy season. I was hoping that monkhood would make me a learned man who might be able to understand the language of the Masters, or the language of the Chinese middlemen and traders. For without these, I would remain at a loss. Not being able to read and write, to add and subtract, the farmers have to accept what the middlemen and traders give to them for each sale.

In buying the year's harvest from you, they make you feel as if they are doing you a world of favour. And should you raise your voice to say that you heard from the radio that the paddy price was so much higher than was being offered, they would yell at you, telling you to go somewhere else.

I never raise my voice, child. I just say nothing. Monkhood taught me many things.

One of the wisdoms I learned in the temple is that greed, anger, and lust are the root of all evil. They may cheat me and treat me as if I am a water buffalo. I hold peace within me. Look around you, child. The whole plain is shimmering and whispering messages since time immemorial. Only some of us can hear them, understand them. Animals have their own wisdom too. There is a wisdom in their gaze. Perhaps they can see all of our cruelty and goodness, human failings and strength, all our arrogance and conceit and supreme intelligence. Yet they submit themselves to us, obeying us. In silence, they are subject to our cruelty and killing.

I know what peace and contentment are. I'm at peace with the land and the conditions of my life. But I feel a great pity for my wife. I've been forcing silence upon her all these years, yet she has not once complained of anything though she works as hard as a beast of burden. Of our children who are not with us, I know very little of their fate.

I wanted to have a lot of children and grandchildren around me but now cities and foreign lands have attracted my children away from me and it seems that none of them will ever come back to live here again. To whom shall I give these paddy fields when I die? For hundreds of years this strip of land has belonged to the family. I know every fissure and every mound on it. My children grew up on it, catching frogs and mud crabs and gathering weed flowers. Still the land could not tie them down or call them back. When each of them has a pair of jeans, they are off like birds on wings. What has happened to them I don't know, but they must think that what is ahead is better than getting bogged down in the poverty of our land.

Fortunately, my wife is still with me, and both of us are yet strong. Wounds are healed by time. Sickness comes, then goes, and we get back on our feet again. I never want to leave this land. I don't even want to die. It's nice to feel the wet earth as my fingers dig into the soil, planting rice, to hear my wife sighing: "Old man, if I die first, I shall become a cloud to protect you from the sun, always." It's good to smell the scent of ripening rice in golden November. In a good season, it's all golden. The soft cool breeze moves the sheaves, which ripple and shimmer like waves of gold. Oh child, I could never give up this land for anywhere else, and I don't want to die as yet. I want to live a few years longer in the hope that one of my children might come back to live and give me grandchildren to hold in my arms, that one day I could pass on the secret messages of our land.

Will some of them come back, my children?